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ABSTRACT

A study described and assessed a working experiential learning model used since 1976 as an adjunct to the basic speech communication course at the University College of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. In addition to class attendance, students in the basic course meet in a communication laboratory for one hour per week. The overall functioning of the model was evaluated by studying the day-to-day operation of the lab; surveying peer facilitator selection, training, and appraisal procedures; and examining experiential learning and student journal grading methods. Determining if students actually improved their mastery of speech communication was estimated by analyzing student journal entries and lab/facilitator evaluation forms. Results indicated that: (1) day-to-day operations of the lab function fairly smoothly; (2) limitations on funding and space seem to be an ongoing challenge; (3) hiring, training, and appraisal standards for peer facilitators have worked well; (4) because of the large number of students taking part in the lab, the lab coordinator is forced to share grading responsibilities with inexperienced peer facilitators; and (5) students find the lab encounter to be a useful one. Findings suggest that the model is effective in its delivery of experiential learning as an adjunct to the basic speech communication course. (RS)

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS AN ADJUNCT TO THE BASIC COURSE: ASSESSMENT OF A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS AN ADJUNCT TO THE BASIC COURSE: ASSESSMENT OF A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

A knowledge of interpersonal or public communication theory does not ensure a student's possession of the requisite communication skills. Accordingly, some form of experiential learning as an adjunct to the basic speech communication course is provided at many universities. The purpose of this study is to simultaneously describe and assess a working experiential learning model used since 1976 at the University College of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. Delineating the model's strengths and weaknesses might be useful to others interested in implementing such a pedagogical facility.

Description of the Model

Both interpersonal communication and a hybrid course (which focuses on interviewing, small group discussion, and public speaking) serve as a basic course at the University College of Cape Breton. In addition to class attendance, students meet in a Communication Laboratory for one hour per week, earning up to ten points toward the final course grade. The goal of lab activities is to help further facilitate in students a mastery of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of speech communication. In regularly scheduled small groups (consisting of five to seven persons), students engage in videotaped structured learning exercises that complement course theory and/or they practice for upcoming in-class presentations. Conducted by the co-ordinator or a

peer facilitator, each lab is at once goal directed and seemingly unstructured. Overall, we try to create a safe relaxed atmosphere where students feel free to express themselves and to engage in reality testing. Hence, facilitators need to be sensitive in the feedback they direct toward students. They must also be open minded and have the ability to redirect or modify the learning tool or activity to suit the needs of each group. Like the facility as a whole, these meetings are also referred to as "a lab."

Additional dimensions featured in the model call for most course presentations to be videotaped so that students can later assess their interpersonal and presentational performances and develop their own behavioral goals. They also complete question and answer journals that examine their cognitive, affective, and behavioral development and these are graded on a ten point basis. Outside of scheduled lab times, students come to view their classroom performances, to meet for informal communication apprehension counseling, to arrange for missed labs, or just to say hello.

Functioning full time and headed by a co-ordinator, the facility consists of a 9x20 foot central room (housed with a moveable divider), the co-ordinator's office, two small, windowed, quiet practice rooms, and a room designed specifically for viewing previously taped classroom presentations. It is equipped with tape recorders, 8mm video cameras, 8 mm players, monitors, and three older and larger video cameras. Serving over three hundred students per semester, the lab is the pulse of the basic course in that its commonality to each section binds both students and professors.

METHOD

To assess the model, I addressed two general dimensions: (1) the pragmatics associated with running the facility and (2) its effectiveness. The overall functioning was evaluated by (a) studying the day-to-day operation of the lab; (b) surveying peer facilitator selection, training, and appraisal procedures; and (c) examining experiential learning and student journal grading methods. Determining if students actually improve their mastery of speech communication was estimated by analysing (a) student journal entries and (b) lab/facilitator evaluation forms for comments referring to either interpersonal communication competencies or to skills acquisition.

MANAGING THE LAB

I conducted an in-depth, three and a half hour open ended interview with the lab co-ordinator to explore daily operations. Polkinghorne (1983) calls the interview the "exemplar of data collection in human science" (p. 267). He writes that, "The face-to-face encounter provides the richest data source for the human science researcher seeking to understand human structures of experience" (p. 267). The interview procedure allowed both the researcher and the interviewee to participate in the assessment process. According to Kirby & McKenna (1989), this method of research from the margins focuses on intersubjectivity and critical reflection on the social context. This ensures that "we are able to hear and affirm the words and experiences of the research participants and at the same time be able to critically reflect on the structures that influence the actualities of their lives" (p.

103). We began with the pragmatics and issues raised included scheduling labs and classroom videotaping, keeping student payroll records, and maintaining and ordering equipment.

Scheduling

Keeping the facility operating smoothly depends largely on scheduling. At the onset of each semester, the co-ordinator organizes some 300 students into approximately forty-four weekly lab slots by attending the first class in each basic course section and providing students with the available time slots from which they may make a first, second, and third choice. Referring to the master schedule, each student is then slated into an appropriate time and begins lab sessions the following week. This procedure works well although each semester some minor rescheduling occurs as a result of students inadvertently making choices which conflict with regularly scheduled classes or part-time employment responsibilities. The co-ordinator also schedules about ten to twelve peer facilitators to conduct the lab activities.

Most classroom presentations (interviews, group presentations, speeches) in the hybrid course are videotaped so students can privately critique their performances. The co-ordinator arranges equipment and operators for approximately 12 sections of the basic course. Selected from the peer facilitators, the videographers generally tape the same course sections throughout the semester. With professors and peer facilitators providing course syllabi/schedules, this method works. If possible, the co-ordinator views videotaped classroom presentations with the students and asks probing questions such as "How do you feel about what you have just

seen?" or "What would you do differently if you could do the presentation again?" While the co-ordinator may help with special problems like articulation, generally the student is encouraged to assess her or his own performances. This has been an effective practice but as the popularity of our basic courses continues to grow, we are left with less time for this type of interaction.

Payroll

Peer facilitators are paid the minimum hourly wage of $5.00 for facilitating labs, responding to journals, taping classroom presentations, and grading journals and experiential learning at the end of each semester. Working from a specific budget line, the co-ordinator bi-weekly compiles payroll information for the university's business office. One week later, peer facilitators sign for and pick up their cheques from the lab. Both the co-ordinator and the facilitators find this method an efficient one.

Video/Audio Equipment

The co-ordinator maintains, cleans, guards, assesses, and orders all equipment. Acquiring funding for upgrading as we serve ever increasing student numbers is a continual problem. On a positive side, the mobility difficulties associated with the heavy, cumbersome video gear of the 1970's have been greatly reduced with the lighter, more portable and superior models available now. Equipment compatibility is a major consideration for each purchase.

Space

Originally designed to accomodate 150 students, the lab space is now seriously undersized to meet our present enrollment. Offering simultaneous labs within the facility is problematic in

that the divider is not soundproof. Students attending labs outside the center feel underprivledged and miss the warm, informal, fully-equipped surroundings that are offered within. Added to the inconvenience of setting up equipment and the accompanying pedagogical aids, finding a room that is appropriately private, soundproof, and comfortable is difficult. Additional floor space is required for individual student viewing and practicing, for storage, and for other general lab activities.

Generally, the day-to-day operations of the lab function fairly smoothly. The co-ordinator effectively schedules labs, peer facilitators, and all classroom video sessions. If professors submit advanced requests for video cameras, the operation works with finite precision. Payroll duties take about half an hour per week and everyone is satisfied with the procedure. Limitations on funding and space seem to be an ongoing source of challenge. Through the interview process I have come to more fully realize that the effective functioning of the lab is proportionate to the effective functioning of the co-ordinator. We have been most fortunate.

SELECTING, TRAINING, AND APPRAISING PEER FACILITATORS

Selecting

Peer facilitators are selected, trained, and appraised by the co-ordinator. To qualify, they must possess a knowledge of speech communication (as evidenced by successful completion of twelve credit hours in the discipline) and through an interview process, display superior interpersonal, leadership, and language skills.

Interpersonal competence is rated on the applicant's demonstration of supportiveness, empathy, self-disclosure, self-confidence, open-mindedness, and sensivity to gender issues. Peer facilitators are encouraged to enroll in the Gender and Communication course if they have not previously done so. Leadership aptitude is judged on whether the contender is perceived to be trustworthy and dependable and to possesses organizational, instrumental, and group maintenance skills. Language proficiency is estimated on the effective use of grammatical and verbal codes. Once selected, (peer facilitators are not required to undergo this process a second time) they choose their own hours with preference being given to seasoned facilitators.

Training

Approximately one to four new peer facilitators are prepared each year. Training takes place in the lab by the co-ordinator who reviews duties, expectations, and regulations and by a seasoned peer facilitator who shares her/his experiences. Having taken both basic courses as prerequisites for upper level ones, facilitators come equipped with considerable knowledge of the goals and structure of the lab. Subsequently, the training focuses on how facilitators can best meet student needs. They each receive a file containing the documentation required for the semester: the master lab schedule, tentative lesson plans, journals to be distributed, journal assessment forms, lab/peer facilitator evaluation forms, and a list of expectations. Much of the training is ongoing during weekly scheduled meetings where problems encountered by facilitators are discussed and upcoming lesson plans are reviewed.

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Appraising

One month into the semester, new peer facilitators are appraised during an informal meeting with the co-ordinator. Essentially a supportive interview, the facilitator's expressed strengths and weaknesses are discussed. If difficulties are occurring, the number of labs may be reduced. Rather than holding an appraisal interview for veteran facilitators, the co-ordinator prefers to intervene immediately when problems arise.

To date, our hiring, training, and appraisal standards have served us well. The overwhelmingly positive comments about the quality of the peer facilitators as per the lab/facilitator evaluation forms, attests further to the success of these procedures. Many facilitators are planning to pursue graduate study and regard this instructive role as a prerequisite for attaining a teaching assistantship. Thus, they are typically effective and responsible. The co-ordinator's aptitude for skillfully selecting and managing people also attributes to the success we've had in this area.

ASSESSING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND STUDENT JOURNALS

Experiential Learning Assessment

The model's weakest element rests in measuring and evaluating experiential learning. Valued at ten points, grades are assigned on the basis of general attitude, willingness to participate, group member sensitivity, and skill improvement. The following defects exist: (1) Grading occurs only at the end of the semester as there is no specific interim criteria or even a grading evaluation form;

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(2) With some 300 students per semester taking the basic course, it is impossible for the co-ordinator to be aware of the abilities of each. Subsequently, she is forced to share grading responsibility with inexperienced peer facilitators which may not be acceptable to professors or to the university's administration.

The grading inadequacies may be rectified by examining the wide body of literature addressing communication competency-based assessment (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Hay, 1991; Meadows & Higgins, 1975; Neer, 1990; Rubin, 1982, 1985; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987; Trank & Steele, 1983) and adopting an appropriate grading instrument. In the interim, a clear, concise, systematic evaluation form must be promptly developed and each student's lab performance must be recorded weekly.

Undergraduate peer facilitators grading undergraduates continues to be a source of vexation. Webb and Lane (1986) described how this problem was eliminated at The University of Florida by instituting a credited practicum course titled "Peer Facilitation." The Department of Communication at the University College of Cape Breton might consider offering a similar course. In the meantime, a grading seminar must be instituted for peer facilitators.

Student Journal Assessment

The journal is a useful pedagogical tool in that it supplies students with a means of evaluating the experiential learning they have encountered. Three question and answer journals focusing on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components are completed in each basic course. Rolls (1981) in a study examining approaches to

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journal assessment (analytic, holistic, and primary trait) found that the analytic approach best indicated a student's mastery of speech communication. Such an approach is efficient to implement, well organized as a strategy, and well suited to the data. Particularly useful for inexperienced graders, the assessment guide suggested by Rolls features a reasonably simple checklist for the completeness of descriptions, the depth of entries, the ability to apply communication principles and concepts, the amount of self-disclosure, and specific areas in which work is needed. Space is provided in part two for more holistic comments regarding each of the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. Adoption of this assessment guide has proven effective.

However, the procedure falls short in a couple of areas. While professors and peer facilitators respond to the journals when students submit them, no grades are assigned. Numerical evaluation takes place only at the semester's end. Using the assessment guide, facilitators assign a mark out of three for each journal. After all peer facilitators have graded all students' journals, the co-ordinator holistically grades EACH journal again to test for consistency. This means that the co-ordinator may have to evaluate and record grades for almost a thousand three-page journals at one time! As a result of our interview, this practice has been modified. Using the assessment guide, each journal will be graded out of ten marks as they are submitted. At the end of the semester grades will be averaged. This system will eliminate suffering through the grading ordeal.

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The interview with the co-ordinator has confirmed my belief that the UCCB experiential learning model is a viable, practical one that, with refinement of grading procedures, might form a prototype for others seeking such a pedagogical framework.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MODEL

Lab/Facilitator Evaluation Forms

Is the UCCB model effectual? To ascertain whether lab attendance, use of video technology, and journal submissions actually help students improve their mastery of speech communication, comments from lab/facilitator evaluation forms were analysed. By using documents completed over a three year period and evaluating labs facilitated by the co-ordinator, and by some seventeen different peer facilitators, I hoped to access a cross section of experiences. Sixty-six interpersonal and forty-eight hybrid lab evaluation froms were analysed. The results of this investigation lead me to believe that students do indeed find the lab encounter a useful one. For instance, in response to a question "How important to your progress do you consider work in the Speech Communication Lab?," 51 indicated "essential," 60 answered "helpful," 2 responded "of little value," and one had no response.

More pertinent perhaps are the written comments offered by students. One question invites suggestions, criticisms, or recommendations regarding the lab and/or the peer facilitators. Using responses to this question as a data base, I conducted a content analysis to assess the lab's pedagogical viability. Since the experiential learning goal is to promote a mastery of each of

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the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, I used these denominations, along with "lab/facilitator," as the analytical schema. After color coding statements into the most fitting category, I then transcribed the statements. From the emergent themes, I conclude that this setting effectively promotes experiential learning. The following are specific examples of how learning takes place in the lab.

Cognitive Domain

Most comments from the interpersonal course may be classified as content based. For instance, many students expressed that as a result of either the small group discussions or the illustrative exercises and simulations, they were better able to understand and grasp difficult concepts. Others noted that the lab experience reinforced course theory and terminology. As one student put it,

> "The lab was helpful in that I was able to recognize terms from class which were explained again. This improved my understanding of the course material."

While few comments from the hybrid course were coded under this dimension, some students noted that they actually learned how to structure speechs and what was expected of them in class performances.

Affective Domain

Overwhelmingly in both the interpersonal and the hybrid courses students said that they enjoyed the labs. Out of fifty-three comments coded under this dimension, 23 contained the word/s "enjoy," "enjoyed," or "enjoyable." "Comfortable" was the second most used descriptor. "Relaxed," "encouraging," "welcome," "favorite," and "fun" were other frequently used expressions. This

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suggests that students were receptive to the experiential learning approach and cooperated in its effort. Specific to the interpersonal course, comments attested to personal growth or improved self-esteem as in the following.

> "I believe that it helped me to look inside myself and I learned plenty of things about myself."
>
> "I found Kara made lab very enjoyable and would make me feel more at ease, especially through the self-conscious times. She was good at building self-esteem at these times."

Behavioral Domain

In the interpersonal course, reflections seemed to suggest a heightened awareness of visual (eye contact, facial expressions, appropriate gestures, use of space, dress, use of notes), vocal (tone, emphasis, pitch, articulation, pronunciation, rate, volume), and verbal (organization, adaptation, vocabulary, examples, support material) skills. For instance, remarks like the following were common.

> "Some experiences in the lab were quite helpful to show the areas you need to work on."
>
> "It was very difficult to actually see yourself on the video and recognize personal quirks, mannerisms, etc."

Another stream of comments clustered around interpersonal improvement. The following are examples.

> "The lab really brought me out of my shell. All my friends and family notice a difference in my speech and my shyness."
>
> "The lab helped me to communicate more openly with people."

The remarks of one student combine heightened awareness and inspiration to improve.

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"The lab made me more aware of my actions when [I was] in social interaction. I can now notice my mistakes and correct them at a given time. Before coming to the lab I was completely ignorant about the flaws in my speech, tone, and actions. Now they can be replaced with with better ones."

Students in the hybrid course almost exclusively concentrated their remarks on strengths/weaknesses and on practice/preparation for graded classroom presentations (interviews, group presentations, and speeches.) The most commonly used descriptor was "helpful." Overall, they seem to find that the lab experience definitely attributed to success in the classroom. The following comments are illustrative of same.

"It was helpful in getting me ready for our speeches and interviews - the on camera work was intimidating at first but it was most helpful to play back the tapes."

"It was good in that I got a chance to practice making presentations before actually making them in front of the class."

"It shows you where your strong and weak points are before you do an actual speech."

"I found it much easier to give a presentation in front of a small group first than to have to do my speech in front of my class."

A review of student testimony contained in the lab/facilitator evaluation forms indicates that the model is effectual. Course content is reinforced, communication strengths and weaknesses become distinguishable, and students in the hybrid course find the videotaped preparation for class presentations particularly beneficial. Reported too are personal growth and greater sensitivity toward themselves and others as communicators.

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Student Journals

I also explored communication journals as an additional data source to determine the model's effectiveness. Twenty interpersonal journals completed during the 1991 fall semester were analysed. Submitted three times per semester, each journal probes, in a different manner, the student's cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth. Pupils identify concepts/theories that are important to them, describe feelings they have experienced, and try to assess their strengths and weaknesses in each of the verbal, vocal, and visual areas.

I began with a similar conceptual schema as in the lab/facilitator analysis but soon found that many statments overlapped. I then divided the narratives into seven categories: cognitive, affective, behavioral, cognitive/affective, cognitive/behavioral, affective/behavioral, and cognitive/affective/behavioral by color coding the journal entries. After transcribing the statments, I was better able to gain insight into the lab/journal experiences.

If an indication of learning is assessed on the basis of testimonial evidence, then this model is clearly an effective one. Statements such as "allowed me to see," "gained a stronger understanding," "developed an awareness," "become more aware," "helped me to learn," "am more cognizant," "have noticed," "realized," and combinations thereof, were consistently used in entries coded under the cognitive categories (cognitive, cognitive/affective, cognitive/behavioral). Some of the topics targeted were self-concept, nonverbal communication, relationships,

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listening, social comparison, and conflict. The following excerpt was typical of several entries.

> "The lab exercise where the couple acted out either good or bad communication allowed me to see how ineffective arguing and shouting are and how calmness and politeness are wonderful aspects of communication. Nonverbal communication plays a large and important part in relaying messages. Tone of voice and facial expressions are two that determined if the communication was perceived positively or negatively in this situation."

What became particularly clear was the interrelationship among the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains in the experiential learning process. Competent communicators are aware of themselves, aware of how they affect others, and modify their communication style to meet contextual demands. Entries coded under this category illustrated that pattern. Many students indicated that they had gained an understanding of themselves as communicators, a sensitivity toward others, and an insight into their communication strengths and weaknesses. Students talked about feeling more confident in initiating conversations and attribute this to having gained an understanding of the tools of effective communication.

> "After studying the chapter on body language I have become more aware of the nonverbal reactions of others toward my communication. This combined with my understanding of empathy has made me become a more sensitive communicator."

Fear and nervousness were commonly expressed themes in the affective dimension. Many disclosed their apprehension of communicating in the classroom or on the video camera. These were often followed by more positive remarks like in the following.

> "The most helpful activity we did last week in the lab was when we were videotaped. I felt nervous about doing the three minute talk. However, when I viewed the playback, the nervousness I felt didn't show!"

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Improvement was typically referred to in entries coded under the behavioral dimension. Listening, communication skills in general, and attentiveness to others were noted most often. For instance,

> "I feel that my communication skills have improved a great deal since I started this program. I find it much easier to relate to people when I'm talking to them. I find I am able to listen better and not just to what people are saying but also to what they mean when they say it."

Finally, thirty journals from the 1992 spring semester hybrid course were examined. These journal entries were more event specific in that students respond after completing their classroom performances - the interview, the group presentation, and the speech. Again the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions served as the analytic schema. Due to entry specificity, these journals provided less insight into the effectiveness of the model than did the interpersonal journals or the lab facilitator evaluation forms. Most questions are content directed, in this case, essentially closed questions thus limiting the breadth of responses. For instance, among others, students are asked in the interview journal to differentiate between an interpersonal converstion and an interview. They identify their group role in the group presentation journal. Some insight was gained from the speech event journal which asks respondents to compare perceptions of their performance with the actual videotaped production. While a few indicated that there was little difference, most proclaimed that the speech was better than anticipated. The following was not atypical.

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> "After I delivered my speech, I felt it had been a failure. However, after viewing it, I found that the opposite was true. I don't think it will go down as one of the great orations in history but I was surprisingly pleased."

If given the opportunity to repeat their speech, students said they would slow down and calm down.

While the hybrid journals were less informative, the interpersonal journal documentation of student's lived experiences of the communication lab further substantiate the viability of the UCCB model. It is clear from the narratives that students learned to integrate concepts at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. Use of the video played a major role in this endeavor and this was echoed too in the lab/facilitator evaluation forms. Quigley and Nyquist (1992) make a strong argument for the use of video technology to provide feedback to students in performance courses. They assert that it furnishes the opportunity to adopt a role similar to that observer, to identify or emphasize particular skills, and to compare different performances both with one's own and with others. The UCCB model confirms this stance.

CONCLUSIONS

Is the model effective in its delivery of experiential learning as an adjunct to the basic course? I believe its operation functions smoothly. Due in great part to the co-ordinator's individual skills, it underscores the importance of personnel in the success of such a model. For instance, the co-ordinator's role demands a practical, organized, responsible person who displays socio-emotional sensitivity toward peer facilitators and basic

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course students/professors alike, and who possesses the ability to recognize these qualities in potential peer facilitators. To realize satisfactory results, professors too must support the lab's philosophy and collaborate by standardizing the basic courses, synchronizing course content and graded classroom presentations with the lab's exercises, and participating in decision making. Finally, peer facilitators who contribute immensely to the process must be dependable, mature, and adept facilitator/trainers. The model's major weakness is grading the experiential learning.

Not only is the model a viable one, it seems to work. Evidence suggests that students enjoy and cooperate in the experience. They find that course content is reinforced, that they gain insight into their communication strengths and weakesses, that they have an avenue in which to practice new skills, and that they become more sensitive both to themselves as communicators and to others as receivers.

In this study I have attempted to describe and assess an experiential learning model. Hopefully, this outline and analysis will contribute in some small way to the body of knowledge focusing on instructional practices in the basic course.

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